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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to produce timely baseline data on the turnover of college presidents and their tenure, using personal, processional, and institutional characteristics. The tenure and turnover of 151 presidents appointed to public four-year institutions between 1987 and 1990 were studied. This population represented 86.8% of all new presidents appointed in that period, as identified by the annual survey of the American Council on Education. Personal, professional, and institutional data were collected using a mail survey developed for the study and other data sources. The most important single finding was that no significant differences were observed in the tenures and turnover of women and minority presidents. Overall, the research findings present a remarkably stable picture of presidential tenure in public four-year institutions. The average tenure for this sample was 8.54 years, compared with 6.8 years for all public institution presidents in 1998. Further evidence of stability was found in the survival rate and the low incidence of short-term presidencies. Only 22% served less than 6 years. While this study assessed the longevity of presidents, findings cannot be construed to reflect on their effectiveness or quality of life in the presidential role. (Contains 7 tables and 20 references.) (SLD)

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The Presidential Revolving Door: Fact or Folklore?

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INTRODUCTION

The media and higher education observers alike have cited anecdotal evidence and snapshots of mean service for incumbents as evidence of growing turnover in the college presidency. However, neither of these approaches provides legitimate empirical data for measuring turnover. This study sought to produce timely baseline data on presidential turnover and tenure employing personal, professional, and institutional characteristics.

The study of turnover dates from the early 1900s and researchers have examined a multitude of occupations ranging from factory workers to corporate chief executives (Price, 1977). In education circles, researchers have investigated patterns and factors in turnover of school superintendents, teachers, college faculty and administrators (for examples, see Weiler, 1985; Tenoschok, 1988; Manger, 1990; Lorden, 1998; and Johnsrud, 1999). By contrast, studies of presidential turnover have been limited and those few that have been done are somewhat dated. The most comprehensive research to date tracked term lengths and correlates of presidential longevity at 42 private and public colleges from 1900 through 1970 (Cohen and March, 1974/1986). Studies have tracked the tenure of incumbents (Ross and Green, 2000, 1998; Ross et al., 1993; Davis, 1981, 1992); summarized post-presidency activities of those who departed the position (Ferrari, 1970; Carbone, 1981; Kerr and Gade, 1986); and explored why presidents resigned (Alton, 1982). A comprehensive analysis of service histories of more than 200 presidents of Research I universities revealed a sharp decline in average tenure, especially for public institution chiefs (Padilla and Ghosh, 2000).

This study is significant in exploring the service of a large cross-section of new public sector presidents appointed over a four-year period. The significance of this study is further enhanced by its focus upon the public four-year sector of higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of public four-year institutions is relatively small (604 of 3,200 nationwide) but they enroll half of all students seeking postsecondary education in the U.S.

Purpose of the Study

The primary goals of this study were as follows:

1. Calculate presidential tenure and turnover in public four-year institutions using multiple measures drawn from the organizational turnover literature.

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2. Identify correlates of turnover for public institution presidents with particular emphasis upon short-term presidencies (defined as those less than six years in duration).

3. Determine if significant differences occurred in the tenure and turnover of women and minority presidents compared to the traditional population of white males.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

Six research questions were explored in this study:

1. What was the turnover rate of the presidents within six years of appointment?
2. Were there significant differences in tenure and turnover by gender and race?
3. How did tenure and turnover of these presidents compare to private institution chiefs appointed during the same period?
4. What was the relationship of professional characteristics (origin of candidacy, career path to the presidency, and number of prior presidencies) to presidential tenure and turnover?
5. What was the relationship of institutional characteristics (enrollment, institution type and wealth, and president's reporting line) to presidential tenure and turnover?
6. What were the post-presidency activities of those who left their positions?

Description of the Sample

This study investigated the tenure and turnover of 151 presidents appointed to public four-year institutions between 1987 and 1990, as reported by the American Council on Education. This population represents 86.8% of all 176 new presidents appointed to public baccalaureate, comprehensive, and doctorate-granting institutions during the four-year period, as identified in the ACE's annual president's survey. For the purposes of comparison, tenure data also were gathered for 389 private institution presidents appointed during the same period as reported by ACE. Of these 363 institutions could be located and to date tenure data has been collected for 113 of these presidents (31%).

Procedures

The research design chosen for this study was ex post facto. Personal, professional, and institutional data were collected using a mail survey developed by the researcher as well as other higher education sources. Multiple measures such as the crude separation rate, survival rate, and average length of service for those who left their positions were calculated consistent with the turnover literature (Price, 1977). T tests, one-way ANOVA, and linear regression analysis were used to assess the relationship of tenure to the variables of interest. Chi-square and one-way ANOVA were used to test whether turnover and short-term presidencies were significantly related to the variables of interest. The level of significance for all tests was set at .05.

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FINDINGS

Comparisons of Presidential Tenure and Turnover

As of January 1, 2002, the mean tenure for this population stood at 8.54 years, with a range of 1.42 to 15.0 years. This compares to a mean completed tenure of 8.97 years reported for their predecessors. The survival rate at six years was 77.5%. As of January 1, 2002, one in four (39) of the presidents remained in their positions, with all of these presidents having exceeded at least 11 full years in their positions. More than half of the sample (56.21%) served 10 years of more. Conversely, the incidence of short-term presidencies was relatively small. Only 10.6% of subjects served less than four years and 22.5% served less than six years.

Relationship of Personal Characteristics to Tenure and Turnover

Three personal characteristics were studied: gender, race/ethnicity, and age at the time of appointment to this presidency.

- Gender: Of the sample, 125 (83.3%) were males and 25 (16.7%) were females. More than half of all female presidents headed comprehensive institutions. Data were subjected to a t test to determine if a significant relationship existed between presidential tenure and gender and to chi-square analysis to assess whether a significant relationship existed between gender and short-term presidencies. In both analyses the gender effect was not significant.

- Race/ethnicity: Nearly 15% of the subjects were minorities: 13 African- Americans, one Asian American, five Hispanics, and two Native Americans. The largest concentration (40%) of minority presidents headed baccalaureate institutions. No significant differences in tenure or short-term presidencies were found between Caucasian and minority presidents using of t tests and chi-square analysis.

Table 1
Average tenure by gender and race/ethnicity

Variables	n	Mean	SD	Range in Years
Gender				
Female	25	7.48	1.99	3.33-13.92
Male	125	7.51	2.42	1.42-15.0
Race/Ethnicity				
Caucasian	121	7.48	2.37	1.42-13.0
Minority	21	8.05	2.17	3.75-14.33

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Professional Characteristics

The study employed three variables relating to the subject's professional career: origin of candidacy (internal/external), whether the subject advanced to the presidency through a primarily academic or administrative career path, and previous experience at the presidential level as evidenced by the number of presidencies each subject held prior to this appointment.

- Origin of candidacy: More than three-quarters of these presidents were external candidates for their positions. No significant differences were found in tenure or short-term presidencies between external and internal candidates. However, internal candidates served longer terms on average, with 8.92 mean years of service compared to 8.52 years for external candidates.

- Career path to the presidency: On the basis of survey responses and vitae, subjects are classified as following either an academic or administrative career patterns. Eleven subjects could not be classified due to insufficient information. More than 80% (or 113) of the presidents who could be classified followed an academic career path, including some time as a faculty member and holding prior positions such as department chair, dean, or academic vice president. The remaining 19.3% (27) were identified as following an administrative career trajectory. Twenty subjects advanced to the presidency from an administrative vice presidency (listed in descending order): finance and administration, student affairs, executive vice president, and university relations/ development. The remainder were attorneys, state higher education officials, military and corporate leaders prior to their appointments to the presidency. T test analysis showed career path as a strong but not significant factor in presidential tenure [$t(138) = -1.88$, $p = .0619$]. The average tenure was 9.73 years for administrative presidents compared to 8.39 years for academic presidents. No significant differences were observed for short-term presidencies.

Table 2
Tenure by career path to the presidency

Path	Total n	Total %	Mean Years
Academic	113	80.7	8.39
Administrative	27	19.3	9.73

- Number of prior presidencies: For more than three-quarters of subjects, this was the first presidency. More than 18% (or 26) came to the position from another presidency. Six members of the sample held two or more presidencies prior to this appointment, with two having held three presidencies. The number of prior

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presidencies was significant in the incidence of short-term presidencies [χ^2 (2, 142) = 8.78, p = .0124]. More than 42% of the subjects who held one prior presidency served less than six years.

Table 3
Tenure by number of prior presidencies

Number	Total n	%	Mean Years
0	110	77.5	8.94
1	26	18.3	7.72
2 or more	6	4.2	6.43

Institutional Characteristics

Five institutional variables were explored: enrollment, institution type, wealth, president's reporting line and mode of selection of governing board members.

- Source of Control: Tenure data also are being collected for the 389 private four-year institution presidents appointed during the same period, as reported by ACE. Of the 363 institutions that could be located, to date tenure data have been collected for 113 of these presidents (31%). T test analysis showed institutional source of control as a significant factor in presidential tenure [t(261) = -2.47, p = .0140].

Table 4
Average tenure by source of control and gender

Variables	n	Mean	SD	Range in Years
Public	151	8.54	3.36	1.42-15.0
Female	25	8.64	3.22	3.33-13.92
Male	125	8.50	3.41	1.42-15.0
Private	112	9.63	3.81	.25-14.92
Female	13	9.99	4.39	.25-14.92
Male	99	9.57	3.74	2.0-14.66

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- Enrollment: The variable, enrollment, was measured in FTE (full-time equivalent) students in 1988-89 as reported by the National Center for Higher Education Management Statistics (NCHEMS). Institutions in this study ranged in size from enrollment of 270 to 38,699 FTEs. The median university in the study had 7,151 students. Linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between enrollment and tenure and t tests were performed to examine the relationship between enrollment and turnover and enrollment and short-term presidencies. No significant differences were found. However, the enrollment effect was strong for short-term presidents [$t(129) = -1.33$, $p = .1859$] as shown in Table 7.

Table 5
Enrollment by short-term presidencies

Tenure	n	Mean FTE	SD	Range in FTEs
Less than 6.0 years	34	11,537	8,396	1,218-34,538
6.0 years or more	117	9,224	8,073	270-38,699

- Institution type: In this sample, 21 presidents led baccalaureate institutions, 77 headed comprehensive institutions, and 53 presidents headed doctoral institutions. As indicated in Table 5, the relationship between tenure and institution type was strong but not statistically significant [$F(2, 148) = 2.47$, $p = .0879$]. The mean tenure was 8.97 years for baccalaureate institutions, 8.98 years for comprehensive, and 7.72 years for doctoral institutions.

- Institutional wealth: Institutional wealth was measured by total educational and general expenditures per FTE student, as reported by NCHEMS. As with enrollment, a wide range was observed across the sample from a minimum of $2,794 per FTE to a maximum of $30,650 per FTE. Linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between wealth and tenure and t tests were performed to examine the relationship between wealth and turnover and wealth and short-term presidencies. No significant differences were found.

- President's reporting line: Table 8 shows the pattern of reporting relation-ships for these presidents as well as their average tenures. No significant differences by reporting line were observed in results of the one-way ANOVA (tenure) and chi-square analyses (turnover and short-term presidency). However, the effect of reporting line upon presidential tenure was strong [$F(3, 135 = .9577$, $p = .1451$] but not powerful enough to be statistically significant with an alpha of .05.

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Table 6
Years of service by president's reporting line

President reports to:	n	%	Mean Years
Executive (System/State)	66	47.5	8.47
Institutional Governing Board	43	30.9	8.28
System/State Governing Board	30	21.6	9.50

Post-Presidency Activities

Overall, 110 presidents (72.9%) left their positions by January 1, 2002. Subjects took four modes of departure: transferred to another presidency (31.4%), retired from the position or died in office (26.7%), assumed a faculty position within the same or another institution (24.8%), or accepted employment other than a presidency or faculty position (17.1%). For both men and women, the most prominent mode of departure was transferring to a new presidency (30.7% compared to 35.3%). Women more frequently accepted other employment (29.4% compared to 14.8% of men). Men joined the faculty at a higher rate (27.3% compared to 11.8% of women).

Table 7
Mode of departure by gender

	Total		% By Gender	
Mode	n	%	Male	Female
Transferred to new presidency	33	31.4	30.7	35.3
Retired/Died in Office	28	26.7	27.3	23.5
Assumed Faculty Position	26	24.8	27.3	11.8
Other Position	23	17.1	14.8	29.4

Comparisons of institutional enrollments and wealth were made for those transferring to another presidency. All but three of the 16 presidents for whom these data were available moved to institutions with more dollars per student. Job opportunities beyond the presidency and the faculty were wide ranging for the former university presidents. Among the new positions cited: U.S. Secretary of Education, state higher education commissioner, president of a major public library, university foundation president, vice

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president for development, consultant, and staff members of national and regional education associations.

Conclusions

The single most important finding of this study was the fact that no significant differences were observed in the tenures and turnover of women and minority presidents. From the literature review, this appears to be the first national study in which their longevity was studied and compared to that of the general population of presidents.

Overall, the research findings presented a remarkably stable picture of presidential tenure in public four-year institutions. The average tenure for this sample was a respectable 8.54 years, compared to a 6.8-year average for all public institution presidents in 1998 (Ross and Green, 2000). The high degree of stability in presidential terms was somewhat surprising given the ominous headlines and general concern that the public presidency is endangered. Beyond mean tenure, further evidence of stability was found in the survival rate (more than one quarter remained in their positions with tenures of 11 or more years) and the low incidence of short-term presidencies (only 22% served less than six years).

While this study assessed the longevity of presidents, the findings cannot be construed to reflect upon their effectiveness or quality of life in this role. By most accounts in the literature and in the popular press, the environment for presidents, particularly in public institutions, is more contentious and the job is more challenging than in recent memory. Further research is needed concerning the quality of life and job satisfaction of presidents, both of which may be factors in an incumbent's decision to remain or leave a position.

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